

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE D-1PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
10 March 1984

A killer of a campus fad

The players say it's all in fun, but others are not amused.

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John Gibbs is a Princeton University freshman who majors in physics and works out on Nautilus machines. He is so young, clean-cut and polite that it is hard to think of him as an assassin.

But he was secretly directed to eliminate a fellow student recently, and he went about his clandestine chore with a thoroughness and creativity that would have made a seasoned CIA operative envious.

Strangely enough, however, his worries were hardly over when he dispatched his victim with several bursts from his semiautomatic pistol. In the stealthy game this improbable hit man plays, the hunter is also the hunted.

"I'm terrified every time there is a knock at the door," the personable undergraduate confides, glancing toward the entrance to his dormitory room. "I keep my gun ready."

Gibbs is smiling when he says this. It is hard not to smile when you are talking about being shot, or shooting someone else, with a water gun.

But it's also hard not to feel a wee bit paranoid when you are playing the game of "Assassin." Paranoia, after all, is a part of the game — and part of the fun.

Assassin is an espionage game that is popping up on U.S. campuses faster than James Bond can help an enemy agent unmake her bed. And in the course of engendering a lot of fun, it is stirring up a smidgen of controversy.

The students playing the game view it as a harmless diversion from the pressures of academic life. Many parents footing the bill for expensive educations probably don't see it quite that way, however, and a number of school officials don't either. Because of its violent overtones, some university administrators would like to see it terminated with extreme prejudice.

At Brown University, the dean of student life appealed to the students on moral grounds to stop playing it, and they did. At Princeton, a similar dean made a similar plea, and the kids kept playing.

At New York University, no administrator objected, but the campus security forces got into the act. They banned the game from campus buildings such as the dining hall, lest an innocent nonplayer be inadvertently squirted while eating lunch. They also got the game organizers to substitute fluorescent-colored water guns for the more realistic black ones, so that people wouldn't get upset when they saw a player flashing his or her weapon outside somebody's dormitory window.

Assassin has its variations from school to school (the Yale players use suction-cup dart pistols instead of water guns), but the game is typically played along the lines of the one currently in progress at Princeton.

In that game, which started with 140 players, each of the participants was assigned a "target" from among the rest of the players and, in turn, became the target of another player.

While the players know whom they are supposed to assassinate, they don't know who has been assigned to terminate them. Thus, over the several-week course of the game, they will have the twin chore of assassinating their quarries while trying to avoid being shot by the unknown players who are after them.

When a player succeeds in assassinating his target, the latter is obliged, in his dying moments, to divulge the name of his target. The "dead" player's quarry then becomes his killer's new target. The game is over when only one player remains.

Prizes (underwritten by a several-dollar registration fee) are typically awarded to the last surviving assassin. The winner of the current NYU contest, for example, will receive \$100. In the Princeton game, additional prizes will be awarded for most kills and "most creative kill."

And the kills are often quite creative. Consider Princeton's Gibbs, and the elaborate lengths he went to to make his first hit.

After learning just when his quarry would be alone in his dormitory room, he had one of his target's friends knock at his door, gain entrance, and then pull a water gun. The target, thinking this was the person assigned to assassinate him, grabbed his gun and a shootout ensued.

In the midst of the gunplay, Gibbs jumped in through the open door and blasted his victim.

Such tales of intricate derring-do are legion. Scott Wenger, editor in chief of NYU's Washington Square News, likes to tell how he exploited his newspaper post to make his first kill in the current game organized by his fraternity.

"It was rather astutely done, if I may say so," Wenger notes modestly. "I had an editor call up my target and say we were doing a story on mice and roach infestation, and ask if we could come over and take some photos of his place. I went in the bathroom, then came out with my 'gold-fish' water gun and shot him twice in the face and twice in the chest."

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